



PERSONAL IMPACT, PROFESSIONAL RESILIENCE:

The Psychosocial Implications of Peacebuilding for Women Mediators

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Abstract

This report explores the psychosocial impact of conflict transformation work on 28 experienced women mediators and peacebuilders from the Women Mediators across the Commonwealth (WMC) network. Respondents were from Commonwealth countries in Africa, the Americas, Asia, the Caribbean, Europe, and Pacific and Australasia. Through research methodologies that drew on participants' professional experiences, the report provides an overview of the personal impact of their work, their professional resilience in the face of challenging factors, and the support mechanisms that would benefit women mediators and peacebuilders working with conflict-affected populations.

Introduction

Women mediators and peacebuilders experience a variety of positive impacts from their work as advocates for conflict transformation and agents of change. However, women also experience detrimental impacts, resulting in effects ranging from persistent stress to long-term trauma. The objective of this research was to better understand the multiple impacts of peacebuilding work on women practitioners, and to identify potential psychosocial support mechanisms that could help women navigate and manage the detrimental impacts experienced.

For this research, psychosocial support refers to both the psychological and social support needs of individuals. It can be preventative and curative and includes education, counselling, wellness skills, family and community support, and other forms of care that address emotional, mental, physical and spiritual needs.

As a result of working and living in conflict regions or with conflict-affected populations, women practitioners are exposed to the psychosocial impacts of conflict, often daily. It is this level of exposure to complex conflict and active involvement in navigating peace processes that led to the following question: "In what ways are women mediators and peacebuilders impacted by their work and what, if any, psychosocial supports would they benefit from accessing?" An increased understanding of the link between women practitioners and the psychosocial impact of their work is crucial to supporting and enhancing women's participation in peace processes at the local, regional, national and international levels. As governments and international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) seek meaningful ways of operationalising United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325, addressing the psychosocial needs of women mediators and peacebuilders provides a practical approach to enhancing participation and strengthening the work of women practitioners.

The goal of this research is to begin an exploration of new terrain within the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda: what is the personal impact of WPS work and what supports can be put in place to mitigate negative impact? This is a vital question to explore in order to ensure the long-term wellbeing of women mediators and peacebuilders, who are often rendered invisible, with less access to support mechanisms and relevant preventative measures to enable their crucial contributions to be sustained and expanded.

Background

UNSCR 1325 on Women, Peace and Security affirms the critical role of women in conflict prevention, mediation and peacebuilding. It stresses the importance of women as full participants in peace processes and calls on actors to consider the measures and mechanisms that will empower and support the voices of women working in the field. To advance the WPS agenda, it is crucial for women mediators and peacebuilders to identify and recommend the mechanisms they need to experience greater agency within their roles.

One of the recent mechanisms that has been implemented to support the realisation of the WPS agenda is the regional women mediator networks. These networks support women mediators and peacebuilders by offering opportunities for networking, mentoring, professional development and deployment. In 2019, the Global Alliance of Regional Women Mediator Networks (hereafter referred to as the Global Alliance) was created to connect and strengthen the regional networks. Since that time, new networks continue to be created, operating both regionally and nationally. The networks are united by a collaborative effort to bring about the practical realisation of UNSCR 1325's call to enhance women's active participation and decision-making roles within peace processes.

In October 2020, the Global Alliance held four global working group sessions on the topic of The Protection of Women Mediators and Peacebuilders to highlight some of the barriers to women's meaningful participation. During the working group sessions, women from the FemWise Africa, Nordic Women Mediators, Women Mediators across the Commonwealth (WMC), Mediterranean Women Mediators, and the Arab Women's Mediator Network shared how lack of protection for women mediators and peacebuilders leads to psychosocial impacts, including but not limited to: vicarious and/or secondary trauma; personal threats; sexual violence; mental stress related to personal and family safety; and emotional, mental and financial strain.

This discussion drew attention to the fact that WPS is one of the only professional fields where psychosocial support for practitioners isn't embedded within the profession. The working group culminated in recommendations on how to improve protection for women, including the mainstreaming of psychosocial support mechanisms within the WPS agenda, National Action Plans (NAPs) and the regional women mediator networks. This research builds on the above recommendations by exploring what psychosocial support structures need to be mainstreamed and how those mechanisms could be put in place.

Methodology

DATA COLLECTION

The data and recommendations in this report are the result of research methodologies inclusive of an online survey, semi-structured interviews and a focus group discussion. The various methodological approaches explored how women mediators and peacebuilders evaluate the impact of their work on their personal psychosocial wellbeing; how that impact manifests personally and professionally; what supports would benefit their person and practice; and what role the regional women mediator networks, INGOs and governments could play in providing psychosocial support mechanisms to practitioners.

Due to the sensitive nature of the research, the authors integrated a trauma-informed and gender-sensitive approach to data gathering by including safeguarding, trauma support resources, and wellness skills and tools into the design, development and research stages of the project. This approach included the following considerations:

- A research team consisting of women mediators and peacebuilders from each of the six global regions represented within WMC.¹ The research team of seven included women from Bougainville, Canada, Kashmir, Northern Ireland, Trinidad and Tobago, and Zimbabwe², allowing research participants to be interviewed and supported by women who work within their region or understand the context they are working in.
- A safeguarding and risk assessment to ensure appropriate conduct, data protection and risk management throughout the research process. The risk assessment and corresponding research approaches recognised the primary and secondary trauma that those who work in conflict-affected areas and with vulnerable populations often experience.
- Survey and interview design that considered that many women mediators and peacebuilders have experienced varying levels of personal impact from their work. Participants were encouraged to keep responses general to avoid revisiting the details of difficult memories and experiences.
- Safety regarding data gathering and reporting. Given the risk to women mediators and peacebuilders in certain regions, the protection of research participants' identities was a key factor for the research team. The full complement of research data and the identity of interviewees was only fully accessible to the co-leads of the research team, and all references to research data within the report are non-attributable.
- Resources in the form of wellness-based skills, one-to-one support, and signposting to trauma and resilience tools for research participants and members of the research team.

PARTICIPANTS

The research participants included 28 experienced women mediators and peacebuilders from the WMC network, between the ages of 25-65, from across Africa, America, Asia, Caribbean, Europe, and the Pacific and Australasia regions. The highest number of participants were from Africa and were between the ages of 55-65 (43%). However, 29% of respondents were aged 25-35 or 35-45, revealing active engagement in peacebuilding amongst younger women. There was an even distribution of years of mediation and peacebuilding experience amongst respondents, with 32% having less than 10 years of experience, 18% having between 10 and 15 years of experience, 21% having between 15 and 20 years of experience, and 29% having over 20 years of experience. The participants reported that their primary level of mediation and peacebuilding engagement was at the community level (86%), with relatively significant engagement at national (57%) regional (54%), and international levels (36%).

¹ Africa, the Americas, Asia, the Caribbean, Europe, the Pacific and Australasia.

² WMC has 48 members from Commonwealth states and one honorary member from Zimbabwe, given Zimbabwe's previous status within the Commonwealth.

LIMITATIONS

The sample of participants in this research was limited in scope and size. Participants were drawn entirely from members of WMC. There are 49 members of WMC and 28 of these members participated in the research, meaning that there was a response rate of over 50%. While this is a relatively healthy response rate within an organisation, the overall number of participants in the research is a small fraction of the thousands of women mediators and peacebuilders practicing globally. The research participants resided in at least 16 countries across six global regions, providing an extraordinarily diverse sample. While the diversity of the sample infuses the research with rich insights across various global contexts, it does not allow for a specific context to be deeply or systematically explored. The diversity of the sample meant that potential threats to women practitioners could not be evenly explored, as risks posed by certain geographical or conflict-affected contexts are not applicable to women in other regions. Particularly for women practitioners living in conflict-affected regions, the impact of their mediation and peacebuilding work may be layered upon their personal experiences of conflict. For these reasons, further research is required to ensure a more robust and complete analysis of the psychosocial impact of mediation and peacebuilding work on women practicing across diverse geographical contexts. To ensure anonymity for research participants, this analysis was limited in its exploration of how additional intersectional characteristics might affect the psychosocial impact of mediation and peacebuilding activities on women practitioners.



Key findings

“You can see the difference the work is making in the lives of women around you. . . The passion and the satisfaction give you a boost to keep going through the difficult times. The positives outweigh the negatives, despite the personal impact.”

Women mediators and peacebuilders often highlight that they work twice as hard as men to establish themselves in the field, while the recognition of their work goes unnoticed and unsupported in comparison to that of male colleagues. This observation aligns with the research findings, as 89% of participants reported that their mediation and/or peacebuilding practice is “moderately” to “very impacted” by being a woman.

In rating the areas of personal negative impact, it is notable that 96% of women reported that their emotional wellbeing is “moderately” to “very impacted” by their work. Women also expressed varying degrees of detrimental impact on their mental, spiritual, physical, relational and financial wellbeing. The main symptoms experienced were reported as follows: feeling emotionally drained (79%), exhaustion/fatigue (79%), worry about safety (68%), poor sleep (68%) and impact on family members (64%).

Conversely, 86% of women reported that their behaviour was either “not impacted” or “moderately impacted” by their work. Seventy-five percent reported that the overall psychosocial impact of their work infrequently impedes how they engage in their mediation and peacebuilding work. This data indicates that while participants experience high levels of negative personal impact and accompanying symptoms, they maintain profound professional resilience in their mediation and peacebuilding work.

Most respondents (89%) believe their work would be enhanced by increased knowledge and education regarding how conflict-related stress and trauma affects them. They noted that, although many incorporate informal psychosocial supports into their practice for clients, there are little to no trauma-informed spaces available to them as mediators and peacebuilders. With research participants relying on informal debriefing with family members and other practitioners as their primary form of support, there was an expressed need to have formal communities of practice, education focused on trauma and resilience, and other mechanisms to better support women mediators and peacebuilders. One hundred percent of participants felt the regional women mediator networks should advocate for women to receive psychosocial support, while 71% felt that an acknowledgement of the need for psychosocial support of women mediators and peacebuilders from governments, INGOs and WPS actors would personally benefit their person and practice.



Emerging themes

IMPACT

The research examined the multitude of ways in which women practitioners are impacted by their work. The results indicate that many women mediators and peacebuilders are operating in the “eye of the storm.” Women are overcoming gender-based barriers, personal risk, and a host of personal repercussions to deliver frontline mediation and peacebuilding services that are urgently needed in areas of extreme conflict. Women are hesitant to draw attention to their personal impact and need for support, as they have fought hard for the respect and recognition needed to have a seat at the table. Though many practitioners carry the negative effects of their work at a personal level, it is important to emphasise that they continue to effectively engage in peacebuilding work to the benefit of their communities, nations and international processes.

Factors that affect women mediators and peacebuilders

Gender-based factors and societal norms

Engaging with conflict can be an intense experience for mediators and peacebuilders, regardless of gender. However, women face additional barriers that can add to the intensity of the work. One such complicating factor is that women practitioners have to prove themselves in order to engage in their work. The field of mediation and peacebuilding is dominated by men, particularly at the international level and in high-profile negotiations. Many women find that they must overcome cultural barriers related to the perception of conflict resolution as “men’s work” by proving themselves equally qualified for the task. Research participants reported utilising various strategies to “make space for themselves at the table,” including emphasising technical knowledge, “exuding asexuality,” signalling their role as mothers, leveraging different identities, and highlighting multicultural and multilingual capacities. Respondents described how these strategies are employed to build trust, gain authenticity, increase the significance of their voice, and gain recognition of their capabilities.

Respondents described being alert to how they must enter the power dynamics that are present within mediation spaces. They were keenly aware of the complexities surrounding power, knowledge and gender, with women describing the sometimes-difficult internal journey of referring to themselves as an “expert in the field.” Women working in more traditional cultures have added challenges, as they take additional risks to gain the respect needed to do the work. Participants described the sensitivities of respecting prevailing norms and not being perceived as “unnecessarily challenging” so they might “earn acceptance” to enable their work.

“I found when working with senior government officials... it was sometimes troubling to be put in a situation where I felt and thought, ‘do I wield my power, knowledge, skills and expertise gently, assertively, or quietly?’ This was particularly the case when asked an opinion for it to be ignored, or not to be invited at all. Frequently, I was the only woman and I found this particularly challenging... and this inhibited me.”

“However, my voice has been marginalised, and I have been kept from the table at times because men serving as gatekeepers have taken the space instead.”

“I lose a lot of opportunities to progress in the work and . . . to feed into policy-level issues because of lack of exposure and visibility, lack of resources, and lack of recognition based on the aspect of my gender and my class.”

“I make less money than male counterparts. I feel like I have to work harder because I am a woman.”

Respondents described one of the challenges of working in a male-dominated field as managing their relationships with colleagues. Many of the women work with governments, militaries, paramilitary organisations and tribal leaders, often as the only women in those spaces. Some respondents reported “resistance” from male colleagues, while others described relationships with male colleagues turning sour as the women gained more prominence in their work or challenged the dynamics of mentoring relationships. Women described employing strategies when working in a male-dominated space, including using humour to engage male colleagues, asking questions to minimise the appearance of expertise, and making extraordinary efforts to build trust.

“[Women have to] prove beyond reasonable doubt that you are capable and, as well, be able to build strong trust and acceptability by all to be able to work at that level.”

“I’ve experienced blowback from male colleagues that was clearly intended to make me question my credentials. Perhaps unsurprisingly, this ramped up at points in my career where I was advancing and gaining more profile.”

“I’ve taken specific steps over the course of my career to improve the likelihood that my being a woman won’t result in me being dismissed or excluded. Mostly that involves focusing on my technical knowledge, comparatively more than my male colleagues.”

Sexual harassment

One of the most pervasive gender-based factors faced by women mediators and peacebuilders is sexual harassment in the workplace. Though sexual harassment was not addressed within the survey questions, research participants highlighted sexual harassment in their comments within the survey and during interviews. Women mediators and peacebuilders are often the only women operating in male-dominated spaces, putting them at risk of sexual harassment reinforced by power dynamics based on sexuality. Participants described the experience of persistent sexual harassment – including sexualised comments, sexual approaches, and work-related progression being tied to sexual dynamics – resulting in further marginalisation. They reported that the decision-making and emotional labour associated with reoccurring sexual harassment impacts their ability to focus on their work. Dealing with sexual harassment and coercion can impact the choices women mediators and peacebuilders make, and can lead to feelings of vulnerability, confusion and intimidation. Research participants highlighted the reality that there is little to no space made for women to discuss sexual harassment in the workplace. Participants also called for structural support to be put in place for women practitioners that would allow for sexual harassment complaints to be made with ease and that would put the onus of responsibility on leadership within organisations to look out for and curtail sexual harassment.

Personal risk

The dangers facing women mediators and peacebuilders are substantial and pervasive. Within the WPS agenda, women are beginning to raise the issue of these risks and threats, particularly in regions with patriarchal cultures. Research participants reported threats to themselves, their families and their staff due to gender-related pushback in relation to their work, as well as the inherent danger of working in conflict zones. Participants described personal death threats due to being women in a “male domain”; physical assaults; sexual assaults; kidnapping of their children, husbands, and staff; and financial strains from paying large ransoms. Participants reported that colleagues have been killed for their work as women mediators and peacebuilders, sometimes requiring them to “go off the radar” for significant periods of time. Many of these threats and assaults come from rebels and non-state actors, as well as from the military. In the case of both civilian and military sources of threat, women report being threatened because of the information they have access to through working closely with communities, while others are threatened because of the very nature of taking on mediation and peacebuilding work as women. Research participants shared their worry about the impact on their families as a result of their work. Not only did the risks experienced by women mediators and peacebuilders have an emotional impact on their family members, but women felt very real concerns about the safety and security of their families because of threats associated with their work. For women whose children or spouses have been attacked or kidnapped, the trauma from this experience is a potent factor for themselves and their families, particularly when physical or financial ramifications from the attacks remain.

Research participants also described the risks they face by simply operating within conflict zones. Travel to remote regions for mediation sessions can include trekking, biking and long car journeys, which can be difficult for the health of mediators and involve significant security threats. One participant spoke about the injuries she had received when running to a place of safety while conducting her work. Respondents described being caught in crossfire as they travelled through dangerous areas, being injured carrying out their work, and experiencing the dilemma of hearing blasts or shooting and having to decide whether to press on to reach communities in need of support. Several respondents described their concerns about inadequate protection from governments or INGOs when security situations have been poor – there is a clear question for many women as to whether those responsible for processes take the security of women mediators and peacebuilders into account as robustly as they should or could.

Some women described how their communities, initially opposed to their work due to their gender, became accepting of their role as women mediators because of their determination in the face of personal risks. Research participants were very aware of the personal price that they are paying, as many described the traumatic impact they experience in the face of so much anticipated and realised threat. Many respondents reported understanding that their lives are at risk, and still choosing to continue in their work.

“Sometimes I have to. . . mediate conflict in places where violent clashes may erupt and there is risk of crossfire. . . Your personal safety is at risk. Such cases have a huge impact on your mental health – you have family, you have little kids at home. You think of them, so that causes stress and anxiety.”

“I ask myself every day ‘what will happen if I am killed? What will happen to my children?’ I am endangering my family with my work.”

“Sometimes we have to visit difficult and dangerous areas just to mediate and get access that [we] need to save lives. In between bullets, we are moving to the next area. . . I am affected greatly, yet have to be strong.”

Wounded healers

Gender-based factors and personal risk create a situation in which women mediators and peacebuilders are acting as “wounded healers.” One of the participants in the research used this terminology to describe how women practitioners work to address the issues that affect others “at the expense of themselves and their immediate families.” Women mediators and peacebuilders often carry enormous workloads while neglecting their own self-care. This dynamic can become ingrained in women practitioners, leading some to report that they must fight their own sense that they “only have relevance in the context of a crisis.”

The issue of secondary trauma is a factor for many women practitioners working in conflicts with high levels of violence and trauma for civilian populations. One research participant described her perceived role as “helping to absorb the suffering of others, to be the bridge to translate their needs to others.” Other participants reported detrimental impact from hearing the stories of the people they are supporting, many of which involve traumatic elements such as losing children and spouses to violence, sexual violence, and witnessing acts of war. Participants described the personal psychological trauma experienced through their work and expressed a desire for skills and training to better understand trauma both as frontline workers within peace processes and for their own wellbeing.

There were several triggers that research participants cited as deepening the emotional impact of their work. Many reported that conflicts affecting children and families had a more difficult impact. Women working with individuals and communities that they know, said that the personal nature of the work made it harder to handle. Cases involving violence, particularly as a result of civic conflict, injustice, discrimination, domestic violence or sexual violence were cited as having a much deeper impact emotionally, mentally and spiritually.

Interruption of work

Women remain resilient in their work and push forward despite the various impacts they carry. However, some research participants did report that their personal impacts can show up at the mediation table when they are overburdened. Women described work-related impacts as including: the integrity of the process being affected; the quality of services diminishing; reduction in time dedicated to providing services; slower mediator response; distraction; hesitation to engage further with affected individuals; demotivation and weariness; tension in relationships with co-mediators; experiencing a desire to quit; feeling like the process is always starting over; lack of energy; reduction in creative thinking; difficulty holding the space; and diminished outcomes. Though these interruptions of work are rare, participants were aware that reducing these impacts on their work through psychosocial support could further enhance the efficacy of conflict transformation processes.

PERSONAL IMPACT

As well as examining the factors that lead to negative impact, the research explored how those impacts manifest personally for women mediators and peacebuilders. The subheadings below are ordered by the frequency of impact cited by survey respondents.

Emotional

The survey results revealed that 96% of respondents reported that they were “moderately” to “very impacted” emotionally by their work. This number is indicative of the deep impact that women mediators and peacebuilders experience from supporting conflict-affected populations. When asked about symptoms of emotional impact, 79% reported feeling emotionally drained, 68% said they feel worried about safety, 46% experience anxiety, and 43% experience unexpected emotions. Research participants reported feeling anger, disappointment, disillusionment, despair, helplessness, overwhelming sadness and stress due to their work.

Women mediators and peacebuilders are keenly aware of not being able to leave their emotions aside while engaging in their work. Women described not being able to “unknow what they have seen,” and shared the emotional impact that comes from hearing stories of trauma and witnessing adversity within conflict-affected populations. One woman described this by saying: “Women bring more of our emotional selves to the work, but it is costly personally to feel your feelings.” Research participants shared the “constant challenge” of trying to reconcile the trauma and loss they witness through their work with the effort to maintain their personal wellbeing.

Some research participants have experienced losses similar to those of the people they are supporting. Though these women find strength and fulfilment from helping others, it does remind them of their own losses and trauma. Other participants described the indignation and anger that comes from witnessing continued injustice. Many women reported that some of their work-related stress comes from a feeling of pressure to help victims of conflict and to alleviate the suffering of the people they encounter through their work. Participants spoke of the frustration and hopelessness that can emerge when mediation and peace processes become stuck, when conflicts re-emerge, when circumstances do not change, and when there is no shift in the dynamics of injustice. Not being able to stop the violence that affects the communities and regions they support was a source of a host of difficult emotions for many. Women described feeling like a failure or wondering if they were making a constructive difference. Others spoke of the relentless nature of the work, and always feeling as if they were beginning the same cycle again with each new case. The difficulty of “holding space” for hard conversations in a full-time capacity resulted in feelings of overload for some women.

Research participants also spoke of the complexity of navigating their own emotional responses within male-dominated spaces. One participant struggled with yearning for the freedom to express “authentic” anger, while not wanting to be labelled as “emotional” by male colleagues. Others described learning to hide their emotions to be seen as professional. Regardless of the drivers of their emotions, many reported having to compartmentalise their feelings so that they could continue with their work. As one respondent observed: “[The] difficulty is that we often don’t do anything with the feelings that we file away in order to get things done.” Participants reported that the consequences of suppressing or compartmentalising their emotions include mental, emotional, physical or behavioural impacts in the long term.

“I feel emotionally impacted as I am living in a conflict zone... I would use the term ‘in the eye of the storm.’ I do tend to witness and experience many uncomfortable and unbearable situations. It makes me feel helpless, as I cannot do anything to stop or end the violence.”

“It does take time to normalise whenever I come back from facilitating dialogues with women in the remote conflicted areas of the border. It does have a relational and behavioural impact for sometime.”

“I feel frustrated as I receive [stories of impact] from the women. I feel all the complaints and trauma. I don’t have a space to ‘explode’ all this-- there is no space to empty myself or share what I feel. It is difficult to [do] this kind of work without us having the self-care we need as frontliners.”

“At home I can show how angry I am, but when mediating I do not show this behaviour.”

Financial

Financial impact was second only to emotional impact for women mediators and peacebuilders, with 71% reporting that they are “moderately” to “very impacted” by their work. Thirty-nine percent of respondents said that they had “financial worries.” Research participants reported that women mediators and peacebuilders operating in the global south experience the largest percentage of financial concerns stemming from their work. Women practitioners working across Africa and Asia revealed that they often do work that is completely or partially un-funded, relying on their own resources to mediate or facilitate peacebuilding dialogues. One respondent described this by saying: “It’s a free job – no pay – yet we spent our money to travel, stay for days in communities just to resolve issues. Financially it [is] demanding at times to meet needs. A lot of cases come up but I could only do those that [arise] when I [have] resources.”

The high cost of transportation, internet connection and other costs associated with work can place a financial strain on women and can eat into money they could be spending on their families and on personal needs. In addition, several women whose family or staff members have been kidnapped because of their work described being burdened with extortionate ransom costs, creating debt and removing resources that could have been spent on mediation work. Some women practitioners from more affluent regions reported leaving senior-level government posts or high-paying civil society roles to focus on mediation and peacebuilding. While much of this work is paid, they receive less compensation than they did in their previous work; though women are quick to point out that their work “enriches” them in other ways.

Several respondents talked about the guilt of saying “no” to mediation cases because they did not have the money to take on the cases. Others described the guilt they feel when charging communities for their services. One respondent described this emotional burden by saying: “I have to deal with the guilt and dilemma of not getting into the community until I get paid, meaning I cannot service the community pro-bono because I am not a wealthy person. And I would if I could do so.”

Mental

Sixty-four percent of survey respondents said that, mentally, they were “moderately” to “very impacted” by their work. Signs of mental impact included: flashbacks (32%), scattered thoughts and difficulty with decision making (25%), forgetfulness (14%) and depression (14%). In addition to flashbacks, some participants also reported experiencing other signs associated with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) or more complex trauma, including hypervigilance, nightmares and emotional numbness.

The descriptions of research participants’ mental impacts were often stark, with people describing being mentally exhausted, unable to stop thinking about work, replaying traumatic scenes in their minds, carrying images or stories of violence, and constantly thinking of personal safety. The mental impact experienced appeared to be linked, in many cases, to secondary trauma developed through listening to stories of, and witnessing, adversity in conflict regions. Although the women were proud of the empathy and humanisation they bring to their work, there was a realisation that their ability to connect to the experiences of those they are supporting can have detrimental effects on their personal mental health.

“I was always the first to be contacted when rebels carried out ambushes, raided internally displaced persons camps, and killed people. I lived in horror every [day]... witnessing deaths... badly wounded people... abductions... children dying of hunger... and many other terrible things. All these had a huge effect on me.”

“When I get stressed over the lack of recognition and progress in my work, a chain of domino effects is released. The way I think is affected. I become down and stressed. My health and physical wellbeing is affected. My relationships are affected. This limits my capability even to work and gain financially.”

“I have been bearing the brunt of it all. It has affected by mental health. I am holding too many forts, as I am taking care of my children, my ailing husband, and handling my work as a teacher. I am earning bread for my family.”

“I think about my work and my colleagues’ experiences ALL the time.”

Relational

Sixty-two percent of survey respondents felt that they were relationally impacted by their work. Half of respondents said their work affected their relationships, with 64% worrying about their work’s impact on family members, and 32% reporting feelings of isolation. Participants described spending time away from family and friends while working, while others reported being so focused on work that they neglected to spend time cultivating new friendships or romantic relationships.

Although not every research participant was a mother, some participants who are mothers spoke of the complexities of navigating family responsibilities and work. This emotional conflict between work and family is still disproportionately borne by women, who report hesitancy to be away from children and partners for longer periods of time. One respondent shared a moving example of the internal dilemma many women mediators and peacebuilders face: “Although my children were young, I hardly had time to spend with them. I was a telephone mother. Because I could not balance family life and work, it eventually affected my relationship with my last born in particular.”

Spiritual

While the survey did not define “spiritual” impact, and respondents appeared to have diverse conceptualisations of what “spiritual” means to them, 58% reported that they were “moderately” to “very impacted” spiritually by their work. While some respondents viewed spirituality in a religious sense, others seemed to apply the term to the state of their own spirits. One respondent stated that when cases are emotionally complex or particularly acrimonious, her “spiritual self becomes quite brittle after a mediation.” Others described being negatively impacted spiritually when they do not get the desired results in a mediation or when processes take longer than hoped. Several respondents associated feelings of helplessness, hopelessness, or “wanting to give up” with being spiritually depleted. Given the challenges that women face in practicing their profession, and the complexities of managing long-term or intractable conflict, it is not surprising that some women mediators and peacebuilders describe their work as “like yelling into the wind.”

Physical

When considering the effects of work-related impact, physical impacts are often disregarded. Yet, 57% of survey respondents reported being “moderately” to “very” physically impacted by their work, with 79% citing “exhaustion or fatigue” as a physical impact. Other physical symptoms included poor sleep (68%), headaches (39%), changes in eating habits and digestion (14%), and chronic pain (4%). In addition to pervasive exhaustion, participants described in interviews or survey comments symptoms such as aches, pains, and physical heaviness related to “carry[ing] the emotional externalities” of their work. During or after very intense mediation or dialogue sessions, women described such physical sensations as a racing heart and sore muscles. Research participants were very aware that their work often resulted in psychosomatic symptoms, bringing the emotional and mental aspects of their work together into physical manifestations.

RESILIENCE

Despite the constellation of disruptive factors and profound personal impacts women practitioners face, 75% of research participants reported that the overall psychosocial impact infrequently impedes their ability to fully engage in their work. This finding indicates a profound professional resilience amongst women mediators and peacebuilders – women practitioners deliver exceptional professional outputs whilst coping with the difficult personal impacts of their work.

Resilience-building factors

Work as a balancing factor

Research participants cited the positive aspects of their work and their commitment to conflict transformation as key factors that enable their mediation and peacebuilding work to continue uninterrupted. Participants spoke about the positive experiences of their work as a balancing factor to its negative impact. Peacebuilding was referred to as bringing women joy, happiness, confidence, trust, and a sense of accomplishment. Women appreciated the fact that their mediation and peacebuilding work allows for continuous learning and growth, and valued the creative, rewarding and innovative nature of the work. Research participants noted that their work brings them respect in their communities and amplifies their voice – factors which were particularly important for women living in patriarchal societies with less visible space for women in leadership roles. Women reported that their professional circles have expanded due to their work, allowing for networks and alliances at the local, national and international level. Many expressed satisfaction in seeing people's lives improve because of their work, and reported that being able to observe direct changes resulting from their work provided motivation to carry on during difficult times.

“I always come away feeling [like] I have done something concrete, constructive and helpful. That feeling stays with me for a very long time. I feel useful. That's the wonderful part of doing peacebuilding [work]. . . you walk away feeling satisfied, especially if it has been successful.”

“This work is mainly about saving lives, which is not a small thing. It is a big thing. So the whole idea of saving lives and preventing conflict gives enormous satisfaction and happiness to me in doing this kind of work. It also instills confidence in me.”

“I have been impacted profoundly and negatively, but these times balance out with the profoundly positive impact that the work has on me and that continues to drive me to continue. It has never occurred to me to stop.”



Gender as a catalyst

Research participants described their gender as a source of strength, noting their ability to withstand the adversity that comes with the pursuit of mediation and peacebuilding. The women's unwavering belief in conflict transformation drives their professional resilience, and part of that resilience is the recognition that being a woman in the field is a helpful catalyst for their work. Participants reported that being a woman "enriches the process" of mediation and peacebuilding work. Women referenced their non-threatening presence, multifaceted connections within communities, and the trust that they have built with communities as leading to helpful synergies in conflict transformation work.

Participants shared that their gender often results in a different response from male conflict parties. Their gender provides leverage to engage actors who are difficult to engage, such as non-state armed groups. Women are able to highlight issues on a humanitarian level, such as how the conflict impacts women, children and the community – moving the conversation away from strictly political goals and humanising the conflict response. Being the first woman to take on leadership roles within their communities means that many women mediators and peacebuilders serve as a role model for other women and girls, while at the same time garnering respect and credibility from men for courageously doing their work considering many of the challenges explored above.

Many research participants spoke about their role as mothers, and how this identity supports greater empathy, patience, deep listening, and finding points of connection with parties in conflict. Women described motherhood as "grounding" them in their work and providing a basis on which to connect to colleagues in a deeper way. The maternal role is also used as leverage in peacebuilding, helping to build trust and connection more quickly or more effectively with some parties. It is important to note that many women peacebuilders are not mothers, which can provide a certain amount of freedom in their work. Women practitioners without children reported that they feel less stress and anxiety about family impact, more flexibility regarding work and travel, and experience more freedom to focus exclusively on their work. They describe other routes for connecting to colleagues and parties and for remaining grounded in their work. Being a mother in the field was described as both inhibiting and empowering.

It should be noted that these characteristics and perspectives are not only exhibited by women, nor do all women bring these perspectives to their work. However, the factors explored in this section were those that research participants named as valuable to their own professional practice.

"I have come to appreciate that how I am perceived and how I analyse conflict situations is entirely impacted by my experience as a woman. I see this now as a strongly powerful influence that I nurture quietly, deliberately not making my gender a point of reference and not in an activist way."

"Being a woman mediator, I am recognised by the communities and my region for the fact women brought peace [to our country]. I am often told by conflicting parties that women are better mediators than men."

"We are a resilient lot and [are] focused on the work we do. We are peacemakers and change-makers and we want to achieve results to have more women represented [at] the table for decision making."

Coping and self-care

Women mediators and peacebuilders reported a variety of coping mechanisms and self-care approaches that they employ to maintain wellness in the face of the difficult factors reported or during particularly intense periods of work. Research participants described self-assessing to determine when they needed to be supported and taking breaks between large or intense pieces of work. Informal supports such as connections with family, friends and partners were heavily relied upon to cope with the impact of their work. Some participants utilise formal counselling to “unpack” and “offload” when work becomes “heavy.” Several participants cited structured retreats as particularly helpful in feeling rejuvenated and in building confidence and creativity in their work. Women reported using both formal and informal supports to better understand how the work was affecting them and how to best manage the impact.

To practice self-care, research participants reported a variety of different and overlapping mechanisms utilised to support their wellbeing: 71% of survey respondents debrief with other women practitioners; 71% draw support from family; 57% engage in physical exercise; 57% practice religion or spirituality; 53% spend time outdoors or gardening; and 50% incorporate reflective practice and/or gratitude for their peacebuilding work. Women also reported a host of other effective self-care mechanisms. Body-based approaches such as meditation, yoga and wellness-based skills were used by many. Time spent outdoors walking, hiking and fishing, or engaging in physical pursuits such as martial arts, were cited by women as helpful. Support groups, art therapy and other structured opportunities to share their stories were helpful to respondents. Hobbies and activities including cooking, singing and music, knitting and reading were self-care mechanisms that allowed women to balance the personal impact of their work. Some women found that mentoring young women, documenting the experiences of the communities they support, or writing about their work allowed them to both process and allow for a future-focused orientation regarding their work.

Ninety percent of survey respondents reported providing informal psychosocial support to the parties they work with, including facilitated discussions, education and training, peer support, wellness-based skills, counselling, referrals to support services, art therapy and creative mechanisms, and conflict coaching. It is important to note that, although women implement the above psychosocial supports for others, there are few trauma-informed supports available to them. Women mediators and peacebuilders are creative in seeking out coping mechanisms and self-care strategies to sustain them in their work; however, more formalised structures of support should be established to provide women practitioners with the types of psychosocial support they offer through their work with conflict-affected parties.

“I do have psychological support available within my family, as I think family plays a crucial role, as well as peers. . . whom I can send a WhatsApp message or call. The sisterhood [of women practitioners] support system plays an important role in mitigating bad effects. The feeling and the knowledge that I can count on my sisters and reach out to them whenever I may need them is the support I count on.”

“I seek help and support from my grandmother. She has been mediating land conflicts for years. . . without having received any formal training. I seek her advice and support which helps me emotionally and practically while mediating cases.”

“Having children has helped to create invisible barriers [around work] and to be present for them and the work differently.”

Professional resilience

During the interviews, research participants explored their thoughts on how and why women mediators and peacebuilders are able to maintain professional resilience even as they experience personal impact from their work. Women were pragmatic when describing their resilience, saying: “We are like emergency room doctors, pushing ahead because it [the work] has to get done.” Participants referred to the urgency of their work and the reality that they “cannot turn a deaf ear or blind eyes... the conflict may escalate if you do not intervene.”

For women practitioners operating in regions experiencing violent conflict, conflict escalation means more people affected and increased bloodshed. Women practitioners persist in their work to avoid further harm to civilian populations and avoid re-starting their work at a more contentious point in the conflict. The participants described deriving strength from their passion to relieve individual victims and conflict-affected communities from their suffering. Changing lives, preventing conflict, and addressing the needs of victims were all cited as drivers to continue the work, even during times of adversity. Participants expressed a hope that persisting through the challenges will eventually lead to transforming the conflict. As one participant acknowledged: “At the end of the pain we know we will achieve important things.” That sense of achievement and gratification at the end of a successful mediation or peacebuilding process is shared with the communities that women practitioners serve.

Women mediators and peacebuilders utilised several personal strategies to remain resilient in their work. Several participants described compartmentalisation as a key tool in maintaining professional resilience, particularly during cases involving conflict-based trauma or intense stories of personal loss. Women compartmentalise the emotions associated with what they are hearing to maintain the mental focus required to do their work. Women practitioners also described focusing on problem solving as a mechanism to keep going through difficult mediations or peacebuilding cases. Some women described being “addicted” to peacebuilding and the personal satisfaction that results from their work. This personal drive for accomplishment keeps some women practitioners going, even in the midst of experiencing extensive impact from their work, including psychological trauma.

Like emergency room doctors, women mediators and peacebuilders work on the frontlines of conflict. Women practitioners would benefit from psychosocial support mechanisms that provide space to heal and recharge before continuing to respond to calls for support and action. Many participants reported a significant positive difference in their professional resilience when they had opportunities for personal healing and personal development. However, these opportunities are rare; new psychosocial support structures need to be created for women mediators and peacebuilders to enhance their personal wellbeing and lead to even greater levels of professional resilience.

“The communities keep calling you to come and share; they call you [even when] in lockdown. They see you as one who can solve their problems despite your own problems of insecurity. So that is the driving force, and you find yourself with the list of people who trust you and look up to you for support. You cannot ignore them – this is a key factor.”

“Women pray for you, thank you, have relationships with you. . . Sometimes when you are out in the field and working, there are expectations that people feel from you, and the expectations can grow over time. For example, ‘This person is a change-maker; they can do this work well.’ There is no turning back. You must keep going.”

“It’s not about you. It is about people, about your community. So, you put them first and continue working.”

“The personal drive of knowing what you want to achieve in your work for peace. . . keeps you going in the midst of all the psychological trauma.”

Resilience from working with other women

Although mediation and peacebuilding involve working with individuals, groups and communities, it can be solitary and lonely work. Due to the confidentiality practitioners are bound by and fiercely protect – and often for security reasons – they are unable to be transparent about some of the nuances and challenges they face. A lack of resources often means women are unable to co-facilitate with others, and are forced to carry the negative impact from their work on their own.

However, research participants cited opportunities to work with other women practitioners as a factor that can strengthen and sustain their work. Women reported that, when they can collaborate or be in conversation with other women mediators and peacebuilders, they feel as if they are “not alone.” Research participants felt that other women mediators and peacebuilders understand the unique dynamics faced by women practitioners, creating a sense of solidarity between women working at all levels within mediation and peacebuilding. Working with other women provided participants with increased enthusiasm and strength, while increasing the synergy and efficacy of their work. The role of the regional women mediator networks is crucial in providing women with this opportunity for collaboration, in a non-competitive, safe and professional space. Research participants credited the WMC network with providing them access to a community of women who understand the burden and the joys of mediation and peacebuilding work and providing them with the space to share their stories and experiences with one another.

Currently, the regional women mediator networks focus on providing women mediators and peacebuilders with networking, mentoring, capacity building, advocacy and deployment opportunities. These networks could expand their provision to meet the needs of women practitioners by creating intentional and structured space for members to share their experiences, heal and recover, and gain strength to do their work individually and collectively with increased resilience.

“My participation in Women Mediators across the Commonwealth and in broader WPS initiatives has provided me with a feeling of solidarity with other women practitioners that has resulted in enhanced personal wellbeing, as well as greater opportunities for international collaboration and practice.”

“I have gained immense rejuvenation and rebuilding of confidence by participating in structured peer retreats, particularly where there are ample opportunities for being outdoors.”

“My circle has grown bigger, and I have gained a lot of strength from my sisters in this work. Solidarity, skills, connectedness across divides of religion and region have given me strength.”

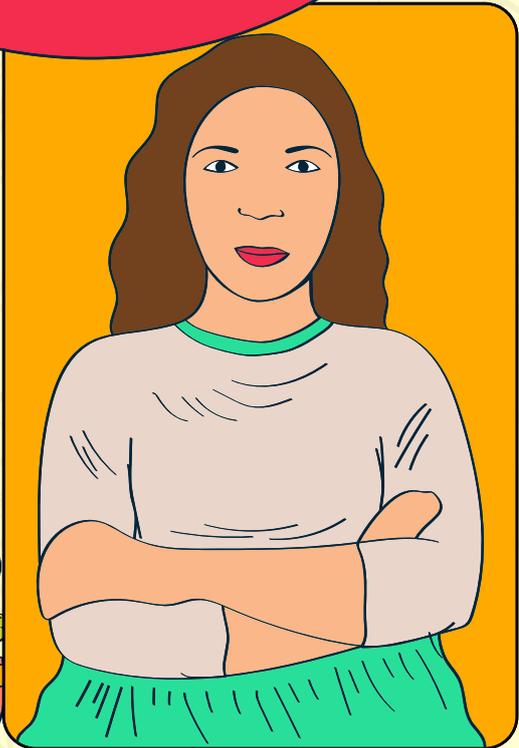
LESSONS LEARNED

Two primary findings were discovered in pursuing the research objective of better understanding the psychosocial impacts of peacebuilding work on women practitioners and identifying support mechanisms. First, the personal detrimental impact women experience is far greater than anticipated. Second, women practitioners display a remarkable measure of professional resilience when compared to the degree of impact and adversity faced.

As a result of women practitioners not having adequate space and support to navigate the primary and secondary trauma experienced as a result of their work, the survey and interviews provided a rare opportunity for women to share their deeply personal stories. Storytelling is a powerful tool for emotional connection and allows women to reclaim the narrative of their experience and state their personal and professional needs. Storytelling can lead to healing through shared connection: many of the participants expressed gratitude for the amplification of their voices and experiences through their participation in this research project, and it became increasingly important to the research team that the participants' words and stories were heavily relied on throughout this report. It is hoped that women mediators and peacebuilders will relate to each other's stories and find comfort in the shared impact as well as their shared resilience.

Another important learning relates to future methodology and safeguarding considerations for WPS research involving women's stories. In future, post-interview wellness checks for both interviewees and interviewers will be offered. In this instance, wellness supports were offered to interviewees and interviewers prior to and during the interview process, but the onus of responsibility was placed on individual women to seek support following the interviews. Because of the difficult experiences interviewees recounted, and the reluctance that women practitioners often experience in seeking help, the research team grew to believe that both interviewees and interviewers would benefit from built-in check-in and support following the storytelling and listening involved in interviews of this kind. These wellness checks could be provided informally and in a peer-to-peer capacity by the research team, with more formal, clinical support available as needed.





Recommendations

The research revealed that many women mediators and peacebuilders are working on the frontlines of conflict regions with very little psychosocial support. When asked what supports would benefit women practitioners, 82% cited “regular participation in a community of practice debriefing/support forum,” 79% cited “formal education/training on trauma and resiliency,” and 71% cited “acknowledgement of the need for psychosocial support from governments, INGOs and/or Women, Peace and Security (WPS) actors” as the three most desired support mechanisms. All respondents felt that the regional women mediator networks have a role to play in advocating for and/or providing psychosocial support to women mediators and peacebuilders. The above insights create a strong starting point for the provision of psychosocial support for frontline women practitioners within the WPS agenda. This section explores recommendations stemming from these findings.



Recommendation 1

MAINSTREAMING PSYCHOSOCIAL SUPPORT

Rationale

Half of survey respondents reported that adequate psychosocial support would enable their mediation and peacebuilding practice to be “more effective,” with the number increasing to 98% when including “somewhat more effective” to “more effective.” When asked what supports they would personally benefit from, respondents selected the following: regular participation in a community of practice debriefing/support forum (82%); formal education/training on trauma and resiliency (79%); acknowledgement of the need for support from governments, INGOs, and/or WPS actors (71%); local support groups for women mediators and peacebuilders (61%); expert-led group retreats (54%); counselling, therapy or other clinical support (50%); relaxation and stress-reducing techniques (50%); expert-led group art therapy sessions (39%); and meditation/yoga (25%).

The importance of this support cannot be underestimated. It was clear from the research that participants felt that psychosocial support for women practitioners is an area that is not adequately acknowledged or addressed within the WPS agenda. Respondents felt that the mainstreaming of self-care and psychosocial support within WPS will strengthen women as they face challenges and cope with the rigours of their work, as well as managing the additional burden placed upon them by gender-based factors. Research participants also observed that it can be difficult for women mediators to realise that they need help or to know where to seek it. As one woman observed: “Sometimes we think we are okay but we may not be okay.” Mainstreaming self-care and psychosocial support will allow support mechanisms to be readily available to women practitioners when they are needed.

Just as importantly, structured psychosocial support will create a culture in which prioritising wellbeing is normalised within the WPS agenda. A culture of self-care is needed in order to give women permission to explore and tap into the psychosocial support mechanisms that will contribute to their overall wellbeing and professional resilience, thereby increasing women practitioners’ level of engagement in mediation and peacebuilding processes.

“Women are playing a major role in peacebuilding and mediating conflict. We have been the catalysts of change and stability in times of conflict. But we became victims in the process, as we are insulted, humiliated and frustrated. Giving us skills that can support us [to] stabilise ourselves emotionally and psychosocially will create balance in our lives.”

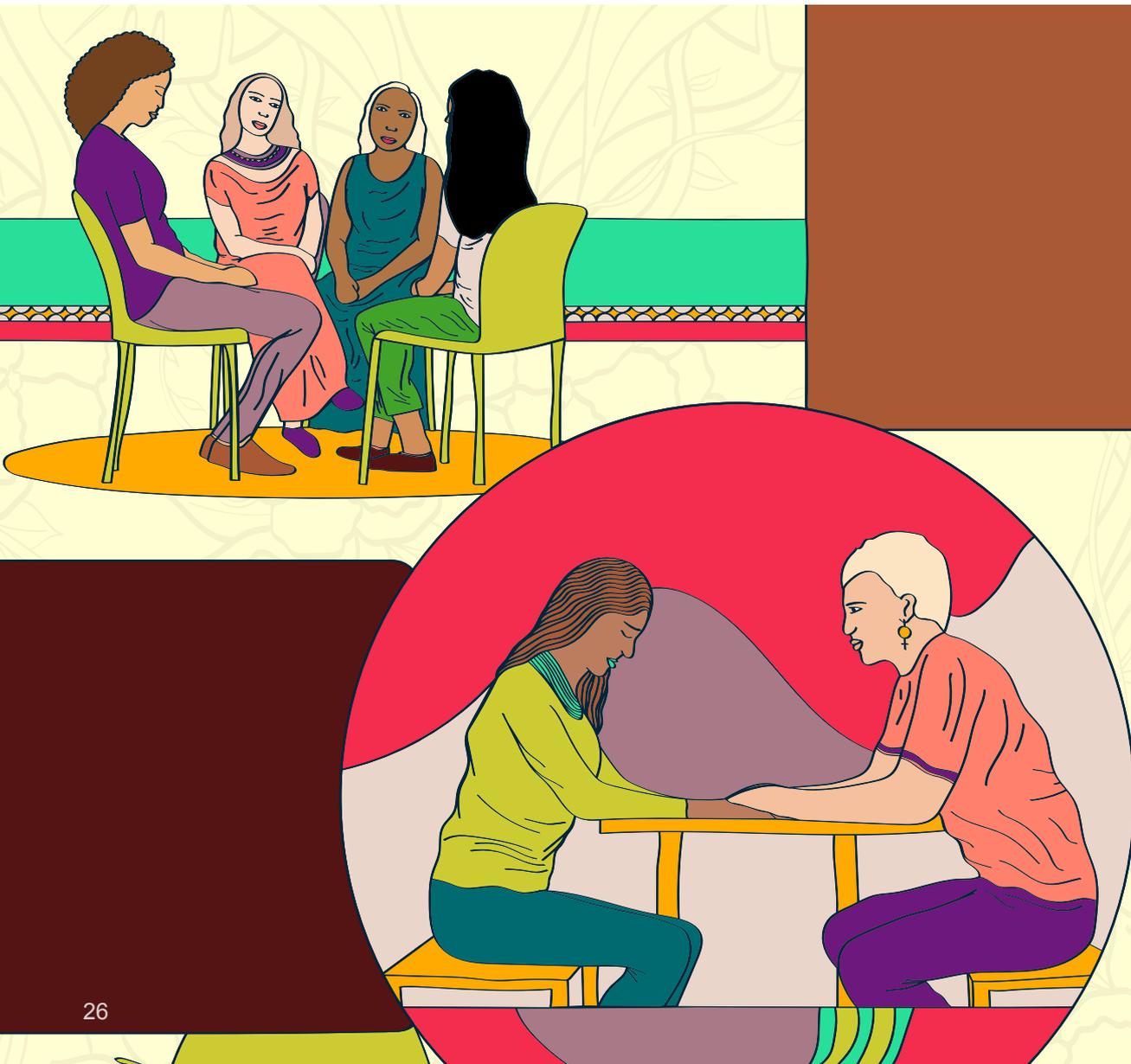
“I don’t believe this theme is being discussed enough and wonder if it is because women fight so hard to be at the table that we don’t want to call attention to our gender or our needs. I believe that normalising the conversation about psychosocial support will allow the WPS agenda to move to a new level of reducing barriers to the inclusion of women mediators and peacebuilders.”

“It seems clear from discussion with others that there is a need for [psychosocial support]. Women in this field are bearing so much and operating under damaging conditions. The ‘weathering’ they display is concerning.”

Recommendations:

- 1. Mainstream self-care and psychosocial support for women mediators and peacebuilders by prioritising it within the WPS agenda.** Governments, regional women mediator networks, the Global Alliance, INGOs and UN departments, including UN Women, should take a lead on creating a culture of self-care and psychosocial support by designing it into programmes, as part of standard operating procedures and formal budget structures.
- 2. Mainstream psychoeducation³ and trauma response into both formal academic programmes and informal training programs for mediators and peacebuilders.** Integrating trauma-awareness, self-care and wellbeing tools, and psychosocial interventions into education frameworks, will allow practitioners to begin learning about and practicing the skills needed early in their careers, thereby preventing long-term personal impact. Universities, colleges, organisations and certification programs should include required introductory courses and specialised elective courses on the topics of trauma-informed practice and psychosocial support for practitioners and the clients they serve, in collaboration with international organisations working with women mediators and peacebuilders.

³Psychoeducation refers to learning related to the psychology and biology of human responses to stress and trauma. In this context, basic psychoeducation would allow mediators and peacebuilders to better understand common stress and trauma reactions experienced by conflict-affected individuals and groups.



Recommendation 2

SAFE SPACES AND PEER SUPPORT

Rationale

Half of survey respondents reported that there are no safe, trauma-informed spaces or supports for women mediators and peacebuilders. Others reported local, national, regional and international resources that ranged from “improvised” informal spaces to more structured spaces offered by international organisations. Several respondents cited I-CAN as a significant source of support through its networks and check-in spaces for women practitioners. Others described self-organised support groups, storytelling circles, mentoring, peer debriefing, professional counselling and professional reflective spaces as supports available to them. However, these spaces were mentioned by a relatively small number of respondents. It is clear that more robust opportunities are needed to meet the needs of women mediators and peacebuilders. Eighty-two percent of survey respondents felt that regular participation in a community of practice would be beneficial, while 61% felt that local support groups would benefit them personally. Support spaces and structures need to be created to meet these stated needs.

Research participants articulated a clear need for safe spaces to acknowledge the trauma associated with mediation and peacebuilding work. From sexual harassment to security risks, to the “witnessing” that is a fundamental part of conflict transformation work, not enough space is created for women practitioners to speak about the personal impact associated with their roles. When participants described their vision of safe trauma-informed spaces, they were often informal. Women asked for support groups within WMC and other regional women mediator networks that would allow women to learn new self-care techniques, reflect on their practice, and support each other emotionally and professionally.

Women practitioners also asked for informal healing spaces where they could share, rest and receive support. One respondent described how the provision of these spaces within regional women mediator networks would institutionalise the provision of support, formally acknowledging the vulnerability of women mediators and peacebuilders and providing opportunities to become more effective in their work. Participants felt that these psychosocial support spaces within networks would reduce isolation, allow women practitioners to let down the barriers that exist in their professional lives, share stories of resilience, and gain strength.

Women mediators and peacebuilders also asked that these structured spaces for peer support allow for professional support and the sharing of mutual expertise. Participants described spaces that would serve as sounding boards for women to test ideas and new approaches to their work, pose questions, and grow in professional confidence. Though research participants asked for forums within networks that would allow for peer support on a regular basis, several participants also mentioned having experienced the power of psychosocial support in a retreat setting. These retreats provided space for women to rest, reflect, share stories, gain new skills, access complimentary therapies and receive formal therapeutic support, if desired. Retreats lasted anywhere from three to seven days, allowing participants to form a deep and trusted community of support. Respondents suggested that these retreats would be ideal for women mediators and peacebuilders as a key opportunity for psychosocial support within WPS. Fifty-four percent of survey respondents felt that “expert-led” group retreats would be beneficial.

The research also highlighted the need for paired and targeted peer support. Several respondents said that co-mediation should be used by more women mediators and peacebuilders to deepen support and minimise negative impact. Others suggested that paired peer support would be helpful – less as a mentoring function and more as a professional peer that could be drawn upon for practice-based advice. Briefing and debriefing was also mentioned by research participants

as a much-needed support for women mediators and peacebuilders; a request was made that briefing and debriefing be done by other women mediators and peacebuilders so that a shared professional understanding could underpin the conversations (for additional detail see 'Prevention').

“When you are living in a conflict zone, you are doubly impacted by what you do. Healing circles, psychosocial support [and] wellness exercises allow you to get support and also to do something for yourself. You tend to forget yourself and push yourself to the back of the list. Support helps you focus on your own needs.”

“I feel what can help lessen this impact on me is the support of safe space and the support of the network available to me. I need this as a backing for all the dangerous work I do on the ground. It would give me confidence that I have people at my back and I could maybe reach out to more dangerous areas as the women need help there.”

“You feel burnout when you’re doing this kind of work and you need to vent, to share with someone. It’s easier to share when it’s someone who understands the complexities of what you’re dealing with. [It] helps to share challenges, personal impacts, cases you’re working on. [It] would help to have expert opinion/alternative ideas when we feel stuck.”

“It is, as such, important to create a safe space where members can pour out and share their stories and go back and face challenges in their home country, feeling stronger and heard.”

Recommendations:

1. **Create structured and resourced peer support spaces for women mediators and peacebuilders that offer healing, learning and support.** These spaces should have clear objectives and may include a formal peer support group with regular open check-in sessions, expert-led sessions, formal and informational opportunities for paired peer support, and access to a resource bank. These spaces should be created within regional women mediator networks and through INGOs that support WPS, as well as more generalised mediation and peacebuilding.
2. **Offer practitioner-centred retreats led by experts and focused on healing, reflection, recovery, skill building and rejuvenation for women mediators and peacebuilders.** Retreats could provide facilitated storytelling sessions, formal therapeutic support, group psychosocial support sessions, wellness skills, complementary therapies and recreational opportunities such as dance, art, meditation, yoga and outdoor activities. These retreats should be funded by governments and WPS funders and offered through the regional women mediator networks and INGOs.

Recommendation 3

PSYCHOEDUCATION AND TRAINING

Rationale

Eighty-nine percent of survey respondents felt that their mediation and peacebuilding practice would be enhanced by greater knowledge about how conflict-related stress and trauma can impact practitioners and conflict-affected populations. While women mediators and peacebuilders work with trauma-affected individuals and communities as a part of their daily work, many practitioners do not have education or training in trauma symptomology or trauma response. Research participants reported feeling very confident in how to manage their mediation and peacebuilding work, but often at a loss as to how to support trauma-affected parties, especially when trauma shows up “at the table.” Women practitioners also expressed a need to know more about how their work can affect them personally, so that they can be aware of signs of impact and know when to access peer or professional support.

Half of survey respondents expressed a need to learn more relaxation and stress-reduction techniques. As one respondent said: “Ideas on how to deal with stress or trauma could help me. . . at a personal level as well as providing support to others who have been directly affected by conflict.” Research participants called for further training on “trauma-informed resilience,” access to resource libraries and reference material on stress reduction, and coping strategies for themselves and those they support through their work. Women called for this training to be embedded within WMC, regional women mediator networks and international organisations linked to the WPS agenda.

Women particularly called for training that is specifically designed for women mediators and peacebuilders, as many trainings are more generalised and do not take into account the particular needs of women within WPS nor the dynamics of their work. Research participants felt that women with “trauma-healing” skills who are active mediators and peacebuilders could better facilitate a new culture of self-care and resilience within the WPS agenda. It is important to note that women felt that trauma-informed and resilience-focused training for women practitioners could be both formal and informal. The wellbeing and resilience skills that many women require can be non-clinical and easily shared with conflict parties and other practitioners. However, as addressed in the following section, some women mediators and peacebuilders could also be formally trained in clinical techniques to offer more formal therapeutic support within the context of WPS.

“I feel there is a dire need [for] psychosocial support in terms of trainings because there are skill gaps to handle such complex situations. I don’t have enough capacity to handle such complex situations of providing support. I am not a trained trauma healer. It is also very expensive to get experts for this, so we need skills to do the [psychosocial] first aid. I am a frontliner – I need this skill to help others and help myself.”

“Sometimes it [is] really stressful in mediating in conflict-affected areas – the insecurity, the attacks. . . Understanding how to manage [these] various emotions and attacks and difficulties would be a great step.”

“I work with people in trauma and I am grateful for having done [WMC’s] trauma-informed training, as I would ‘stumble’ over trauma, feeling inadequate and sometimes incompetent with how to work carefully and mindfully with those parties in trauma.”

Recommendations:

- 1. Embed trauma-informed and resilience-focused training within the WPS agenda, operationalised for and by leadership.** Training would provide leadership with a deeper understanding of the impact that women practitioners experience, and influence the implementation of policies, programming and support through a trauma-informed lens. Trainings for women mediators and practitioners could take place within regional women mediator networks and INGOs, and offer practical tools for practitioners.
- 2. Certify women mediators and peacebuilders to offer trauma-informed and resilience-focused training through a train-the-trainer model.** Many women within the field of WPS have backgrounds in social work, psychology and/or counselling and have an in-depth understanding of how trauma is impacting women practitioners. A train-the-trainer model would allow practitioners to share practical skills with conflict parties and conflict-affected communities for broader reach and positive impact.
- 3. Create a databank of resources on trauma, self-care and resilience for women mediators and peacebuilders.** This databank could be created jointly by the women mediator networks and housed on the Global Alliance's webpage under a 'Support Resources' tab. The section could include academic publications, journals, videos, presentation recordings and papers, and wellbeing tools. This databank would be freely accessible and available through the regional women mediator networks and INGOs.



Recommendation 4

COUNSELLING AND THERAPEUTIC SUPPORT

Rationale

Half of survey respondents cited “counselling, therapy or other clinical support” as potentially beneficial to themselves and other women mediators and peacebuilders. Respondents identified potential benefits of formal therapeutic support including space to process the pressures of their work, help to re-energise, and assistance in coping with the stressful or mentally difficult parts of their work. A readily available therapeutic support infrastructure within WPS would allow women practitioners to access support at any stage of their professional journey. Several respondents also suggested that family support would be helpful, as women mediators are often “working in hostile environment[s] so [their families] feel that anything can happen to them anytime.”

The research revealed an unexpected insight from women practitioners – they felt strongly that counselling and therapeutic support must be specialised and based on “an understanding of the nature of the work.” A number of research participants reported that standard therapy was “not quite enough,” and that counsellors often did not have an understanding of the conflict environment or the particular pressures experienced by women mediators and peacebuilders. They advocated for a specialised counselling service to be established for women mediators and peacebuilders that could include exit therapy when completing particularly difficult cases involving traumatic impact. As with peer support, research participants felt that a cadre of women mediators and peacebuilders should be supported to access professional academic training in order to be able to offer clinical support to those who need it within the field of WPS.

“Mediators need clinical therapeutic support for their emotional [and] social wellbeing. [They can] be meet with resistance, threats, or in my case lack of confidence, isolation, anxiety and sleeplessness. These situations. . . can hinder health and resilience. Even having access to debriefing can assist [to] lower the levels of stress.”

“Some [women mediators] are gifted. They can be identified and be given proper training so that they develop required skills and build their capacity in trauma healing and psychosocial support. They can be available to those who. . . need their support.”

“My work was not really blocked by psychosocial impact, [but] I realised much later that I needed counselling after I brought peace.”

Recommendations:

1. **Operationalise a counselling infrastructure for women practitioners, by women practitioners, within the WPS agenda.** Counselling services could be funded by governments and others managing peace processes and offered through INGOs.
2. **Offer specialised training and counselling certification to women mediators and peacebuilders who are interested in providing clinical support to their peers.** Pursuing specialised training also provides women practitioners with an opportunity to pause from frontline work while continuing to support peace processes by providing clinical support to peacebuilders. Funding for the creation of a cadre of women practitioners with clinical skills should be provided by governments and WPS funders.

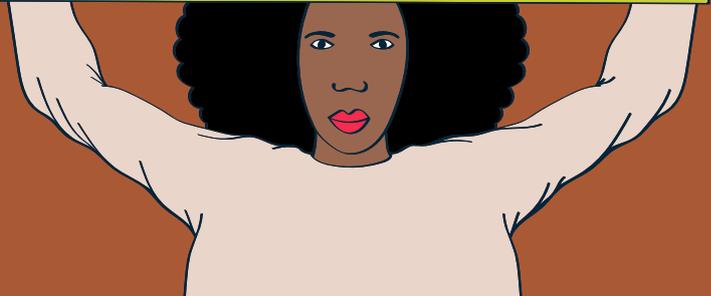


Greater knowledge about how conflict-related stress and trauma can impact practitioners and conflict-affected populations

Awareness of signs of impact and know when to access peer or professional support



Trauma-informed and resiliency-focused training embedded within working practices



Recommendation 5

ADVOCACY AND RESEARCH

Rationale

Advocacy emerged as a key issue surrounding the psychosocial support of women mediators and peacebuilders. Many women felt that there are few champions for women's wellbeing within WPS. The momentum within the WPS agenda has been to get women mediators and peacebuilders to the table, but this research suggests that there are barriers to women's full participation related to the ongoing risks that face women in the field. From debriefing to peer support, training and therapeutic support, advocacy is required to establish and fund the structures that will allow for meaningful support mechanisms to be available to women mediators and peacebuilders.

Alongside high-level advocacy, the research revealed that recognition is a key priority for women mediators and peacebuilders. As one research participant said: "support comes with recognition." Women practitioners want their work to be recognised and the disproportionate risks and impacts they experience to be understood – and they feel that this recognition and validation will result in mobilisation to create the support infrastructures they need. Ultimately, women want opportunities for their participation to grow through an acknowledgement of what they already contribute to the field of international peacebuilding.

Research participants felt that ongoing research into WPS, more generally – and psychosocial impact and support, specifically – will assist in advocacy for the support of women mediators and peacebuilders. Many women expressed appreciation for this research and asked that follow-up research take place to advance the conversation about self-care and psychosocial support within the WPS agenda. The importance of documenting women's experiences and amplifying their voices through research was highly valued by participants. There was also a recognition that the impact on women mediators and peacebuilders may evolve over time, as may their understanding of trauma-informed approaches to mediation and peacebuilding. Continuing to research this area of the WPS agenda will provide an evolving understanding of women practitioners' needs, as well as their contributions to the field of peacebuilding.

"I believe that women mediators and peacebuilders are disproportionately impacted by peacebuilding work, as we have to push against barriers created by sexism, even as we do work that makes an impact on all practitioners, regardless of gender. A greater recognition of this impact, and practical supports to mitigate the impact, could open women mediators and peacebuilders to even more effective work in the field."

"Most of us are unrecognised peace workers, which impacts on personal safety and health. Recognition of this kind of work will allow lots of things to fall into place – support comes with recognition."

"Women practitioners undertake this work in an environment that is threatening and thankless. It is important for society and governments to recognise the value of this work and take safety measures."

Recommendations:

- 1. Integrate advocacy for the psychosocial support of women mediators and peacebuilders into the WPS agenda in order to normalise the discussion.** Advocacy should be utilised to change policies and agendas, increase budgets and funding, and create new structures for support. Governments, INGOs and regional women mediator networks need to collaborate to amplify the discussion, source funding and create practical structures of support.
- 2. Promote recognition of the role of women mediators and peacebuilders at local regional, national and international levels.** This recognition should come with practical commitments to the safety and security of women practitioners, as well as an acknowledgment of personal impact and professional resilience. Though governments are in a key position to offer recognition, INGOs and regional women mediator networks need to continue to promote the work and needs of women practitioners.
- 3. Fund continued research into themes related to the personal impact and professional resilience of women mediators.** Research themes may include: intersectional aspects of the psychosocial impact of peacebuilding on women peacebuilders; support mechanisms; sources of professional resilience; removing barriers to participation; intergenerational support; the role of family responsibilities; and the application of clinical versus non-clinical support structures. Governments, INGOs and regional women mediator networks should fund expanded research to better understand the barriers and needs that exist for women practitioners in order to address them within the WPS agenda.



Recommendation 6

PREVENTION

Rationale

In addition to proactively addressing the psychosocial impact of their work on women mediators and peacebuilders, there is a need for a systematic approach to prevent potential negative impacts on women mediators and peacebuilders. Research participants suggested a number of proactive supports that would reduce the personal impact of their work. Proper conflict analysis and risk assessments prior to going into the field would allow the safety of women practitioners and conflict parties to be fully assessed and preventatively addressed. Conflict analysis should include an assessment of the potential traumatic impact on the parties, allowing for mediators and peacebuilders to design trauma-informed processes.

Pre-deployment briefings should be provided to women mediators and peacebuilders that include coping strategies and psychological preparation before going into conflict situations. Debriefings that include psychosocial themes should also be available for women mediators and peacebuilders as they complete cases and return from the field. These briefing and debriefing sessions should be facilitated by women practitioners with experience in the field, so that they can be fully relevant to the very specific needs and experiences of women mediators and peacebuilders. One research participant recommended that a simple questionnaire could be developed to allow women mediators and peacebuilders to assess themselves regularly and determine what level of support may be needed at various stages of work.

In regards to the prevention of the sexual harassment of women mediators and peacebuilders, women are calling for a structural change to the way in which sexual harassment is handled within organisations. Research participants suggested that prevention is a leadership responsibility, with an obligation on organisational leaders to create a safe space for women to make complaints and ask for support. Leaders should also be proactively scanning organisations to address existing sexual harassment rather than putting the onus of responsibility on women to raise the issue. Structures and systems should be established within organisations to make it simple and straightforward for women to bring attention to sexual harassment without any personal penalties, and for training and direct intervention for those who have been found to engage in sexual harassment.

Recommendations:

- 1. Develop conflict analysis and risk assessment frameworks that can be applied by women mediators and peacebuilders to evaluate the potential threats, risks and negative impacts associated with specific contexts.** The frameworks should provide tools, guidance and resources to enable women practitioners to respond to the risks and enhance their safety and wellbeing pre-, during and post-process. These should be supported by governments and WPS actors as an essential component of any process.
- 2. Offer pre- and post-deployment briefings that take into account psychosocial needs and impact to every woman mediator and peacebuilder.** Pre-deployment briefings should be conducted by other women mediators and peacebuilders for the purpose of preventative planning and support. Post-deployment debriefings could range from formal counselling to informal peer support. Briefings should be funded by those sponsoring processes.
- 3. Establish sexual harassment awareness, response and reporting frameworks within organisations working with and deploying women mediators and peacebuilders.** From the outset of preparing for a mediation or peacebuilding process, women should know exactly what support mechanisms are in place and how to access those supports immediately upon experiencing harm. Governments, INGOs and regional women mediator networks should employ these frameworks and require related organisations to do so.

Recommendation 7

FINANCIAL SUPPORT

Rationale

The need for financial support is significant amongst practitioners operating in contexts that do not pay or pay well for mediation and peacebuilding services. Many women described the financial conflict between meeting the needs of their families and doing the work that they love, with a struggle to pay for the transportation, living and other professional expenses required to operate in the field. Women also discussed a disconnect where, in some contexts, community work requires government authorisation, necessitating payment that does not come with a receipt – but INGOs do not offer payment for services without proof of payment. These financial burdens create considerable stress for women practitioners; more robust and flexible funding for the deployment of women mediators and peacebuilders would reduce stress and facilitate wellbeing.

More specifically, financial support is necessary for self-care and psychosocial support to be mainstreamed within the WPS agenda. Peer support spaces, retreats, training, therapeutic engagement, and the creation of frameworks and mechanisms to ensure rapid and ready access to these supports will require financial commitments. Research participants suggested that the financing of psychosocial support could be established at multiple levels: funding for individual practitioners included in the budgets of funded pieces of work; funding for programmes available for women practitioners at national, regional or international levels; and funded support spaces within regional women mediator networks. A “rapid action fund” to address psychosocial support and security issues was suggested as a flexible resource that would allow women working in dangerous contexts to receive urgent and streamlined support.

Recommendations:

1. **Implement funding structures that will effectively support the deployment and compensation of women mediators and peacebuilders working at the local, national, regional and international levels.** Advocacy for governments and INGOs to provide appropriate levels of funding for the deployment of women practitioners should continue to be a key aim within the WPS agenda.
2. **Fund new self-care and psychosocial support structures for women mediators and peacebuilders.** Funding through a gendered lens means recognising the need to fund co-mediators and peacebuilding teams to lessen the impact of security concerns and to embed psychosocial support into processes. This funding should come from governments and WPS funders and allocated throughout WPS structures and organisations, including the regional women mediator networks.



Calls to action

Research participants believe that concrete actions can be taken to support the psychosocial needs of women mediators and peacebuilders if governments, international and multilateral agencies, WPS organisations and regional women mediator networks commit to creating new structures and mechanisms of support. Through NAPs, budget prioritisation, activating networks of WPS actors, and regional policy formation, platforms can be created for the enhanced psychosocial support of women mediators and peacebuilders. By taking on specific roles, key international bodies can increase the likelihood that new and sustainable structures will be established that will work to increase the participation of women and girls in mediation and peacebuilding processes worldwide.

GOVERNMENTS

Governments play a critical role in ensuring that structures are created that reduce barriers related to psychosocial impact and so increase women's participation and influence in peace processes. For example, NAPs are increasingly addressing the topic of protection and how it can support women engaging in peacebuilding work. Governments can expand protection mechanisms within NAPs to include some of the practical psychosocial supports recommended in this report, such as pre- and post-deployment briefings that consider conflict and risk analysis frameworks and appropriate psychosocial responses to what mediators have experienced in the field. Not only is it essential that governments recognise the unique risks that many women mediators and peacebuilders face in carrying out their work; governments must take meaningful steps to decrease this risk and associated personal impacts. Without the active support of governments, it will be difficult to mainstream psychosocial support as an essential component of the WPS agenda.

The provision of financial support by governments will be key to enacting the identified recommendations: to increase participation, governments must fund women mediator networks and other structures of support within the WPS agenda. Further, governments must employ and deploy women mediators and peacebuilders and provide the financial support needed to compensate them for their work. Governments have a significant role to play in funding the prevention recommendations, as well as advocacy and research to better determine and support the long-term psychosocial needs of women practitioners. Governments can also direct funding to WPS actors and INGOs to allow for the creation of safe spaces and peer support, education and training, and counselling and therapeutic support.

The research shows that women are currently doing the work of WPS without psychosocial support, and they will continue to do so. However, the risk of not providing adequate funding to women mediators and peacebuilders is that they may face increasing safety and security risks, negative emotional and physical impacts, and burnout. In the absence of preventative and responsive frameworks of psychosocial support, the work of women mediators and peacebuilders may suffer decreased levels of sustainability and effectiveness. From the bottom up, women are tapping into the few resources that are available – but this research makes it clear that a top-down approach to psychosocial support is needed, which only governments can meaningfully provide.

INTERNATIONAL ORGANISATIONS

International and multilateral agencies, as well as WPS actors, play a significant role in advancing the WPS agenda and supporting the work of women mediators and peacebuilders. Through deployment, advocacy and the creation of normative frameworks, INGOs and multilateral agencies, such as UN

Women and other UN agencies, facilitate the conditions that allow women practitioners to increase their participation and take on more significant roles within mediation and peace processes. For this reason, international organisations can play a significant role in mainstreaming psychosocial support as a key element of realising the WPS agenda. International organisations also have existing structures, frameworks and networks that can enable the implementation of recommendations made in this report.

WPS actors and multilateral organisations can take a lead in mainstreaming awareness of the impact of mediation and peacebuilding work on women practitioners, as well as facilitating broader dialogue about the ways in which this impact can be meaningfully addressed. These organisations can create safe spaces for peer support, as well as hosting formal counselling and therapeutic support services, ensuring that they are specialised to meet the unique needs of WPS practitioners. International organisations can also establish broader psychological support platforms for women mediators and dedicate resources for trauma healing and support for the conflict-affected communities they work with. INGOs can dedicate emergency funds for trauma response so that when crises arise that result in psychological impact, these emergency funds can be utilised to provide support services.

In order to deepen the knowledge base within WPS, INGOs can provide expertise for training and capacity building in trauma response and psychosocial support, so that women mediators and peacebuilders feel better equipped to manage trauma responses that may emerge during formal processes. Further, international organisations and WPS actors can collaborate with universities and key mediation organisations to create modules of learning in basic psychoeducation and trauma-response so that graduates receive an integrated understanding of these practices as a part of their academic training. INGOs can also fund and facilitate increased research and advocacy to allow for a better understanding of the needs of women mediators and peacebuilders. Based on research and existing expertise within WPS, international organisations can work with governments and women mediator networks to enable prevention frameworks that will minimise existing risks faced by women in the field.

WOMEN MEDIATOR NETWORKS

Women mediator networks provide existing infrastructure, resources, connections and trust required to bring to life many of the recommendations made in this report. Networks can also facilitate a cultural shift that will allow for psychosocial issues to be more openly addressed within the WPS agenda. Though current funding structures do not provide the resources required for the networks to carry out formalised psychosocial support activities, the networks already enable women mediators and peacebuilders to maintain informal supportive connections. With increased funding and collaborative efforts with governments and international organisations, the women mediator networks could play an essential role in normalising and mainstreaming psychosocial support within WPS. This research supports the centrality of the networks, as 100% of survey respondents said that regional women mediator networks have a significant role to play in advocating for and providing psychosocial support to women mediators and peacebuilders.

The regional women mediator networks and the Global Alliance can work with international organisations to facilitate safe spaces and peer support for women mediators and peacebuilders, either by providing opportunities for peer support or by signposting members to services provided by organisations and agencies. Networks can also notify their members of formal counselling and therapeutic services provided by international organisations for women mediators and peacebuilders. Networks have an essential role to play regarding advocacy and research by utilising their existing connections with members to lead and participate in research, as well as advocating for change based on both research and the lived experience of members. Similarly, networks can collaborate with academic institutions, mediation organisations and international organisations to ensure that their members both receive and contribute to psychoeducation and training that will increase the knowledge base regarding clinical and non-clinical trauma response within mediation and peacebuilding practice.

Prevention and protection are important themes to women mediators and peacebuilders, and issues surrounding prevention emerged robustly through the research survey, interviews and focus group. Participants clearly asked for new mechanisms to be put in place that will allow for prevention of psychosocial impact throughout their work. From gender-sensitive conflict analysis and risk assessment, to pre- and post-deployment briefings, to frameworks for sexual harassment prevention and response, women mediators and peacebuilders need practical mechanisms to be put into place that reduce risk. Though many of these interventions will need to be implemented by governments and international organisations, women mediator networks can play an important and collaborative role in ensuring that these initiatives are designed and implemented in ways that appropriately cater to the specific needs of WPS practitioners.



Conclusion

This research has provided vital insight into the personal impact and professional resilience of women mediators and peacebuilders. Women experience a range of detrimental personal impacts from their work which are often not understood or acknowledged. Yet women practitioners continue to deliver their work effectively, finding ways to navigate gender-based barriers to ensure conflict is addressed in positive and proactive ways. With this knowledge, new structures of support can be established that will allow barriers to women's participation to be practically addressed within the WPS agenda. Through advocacy and collaboration, governments, international organisations, regional women mediator networks and other WPS actors can address the support needs of women mediators and peacebuilders, enabling more vibrant and effective practice from the women who are transforming conflict across the globe.



